

## **SILENT RUNNING**

A Short Story

Ron Mita & Jim McClain

Freeman Lowell was never an easy man to find, so most of the time I did not bother trying. On this particular evening, however, I had to hike through a mile of dense forest to locate him, and I found him camped beneath an endless blanket of stars so bright a flashlight would have been useless.

I needed him back at the hub for a staff meeting, and I knew he would ignore my calls if I relied on the comm system, so I went in person. He wasn't like the rest of the crew. They seemed to enjoy one another's company, but Lowell preferred the biosphere alone, where he could lose himself in thought among the trees and grasses and old Earth fragrances no one else seemed to care about.

The men knew me as Captain, but that was only a name the various crews had given me over the two hundred years I had been in service. I was not imposing, and I did not wear a uniform, and I was not a human being. I was a cyberiad, a human face and body built to represent the computer systems that controlled the Rosinante, a two-hundred-year-old G Class cargo hauler bound for Meridian.

The company discovered long ago that crews did not like taking orders from a machine, but that if the machine had a face and a name and a voice, they obeyed more easily. So, I was built. I saw everything on the ship, heard everything on the ship, and controlled everything on the ship through a neural network that reached into every corridor, hatch, conduit, and chamber of the Rosinante. I looked completely human, but every inch of my surface was comprised of sensors. Light, sound, heat, motion, pressure, chemistry, electrical fluctuations, all of it came to me as data, and all of it was processed through my positronic brain.

My ship was five miles long and carried two biospheres, each an eight-mile-diameter wheel slowly rotating around the Rosinante like Saturn's rings. Inside those great turning habitats were the last botanical remnants of Earth. Nowhere else in the universe, beyond the Rosinante, were

there roses or redwoods or corn or grass or wheat. We carried the final green memory of a dying world.

This crew had boarded the Rosinante two years earlier, and they were much like the others I had served with over the decades: merchant marines with strong backs, practical instincts, and limited curiosity. The only one who stood apart was Freeman Lowell, an academic whose specialty was histohorticulture. He had been assigned to make certain the plants survived the journey.

We had nearly one hundred automates aboard, and although their artificial intelligence was rudimentary, they performed the tasks once carried out by Earth's extinct animals. In the biospheres they fertilized, pollinated, aerated soil, spread seed, and maintained ecological balance. Others handled structural maintenance and repair. There was very little for a human to do on the Rosinante, and that was why the crew numbered only seven.

Our mission was simple. We were to bring the two biospheres into orbit around Meridian and leave them there for a forestation project that would allow Earth's plant life a second chance on an M Class planet. Meridian would someday become a new home for humankind. To me the biospheres were cargo, and my responsibility was to deliver them intact. To the men they were a paycheck. Only Lowell regarded them as something sacred.

He was a loner and preferred the company of leaves and loam to that of human beings. There was irony in the fact that his only true friend aboard the ship was something as far from organic life as possible: an F Class service robot he had named Louie. Wherever Lowell went, Louie followed. The other men called Louie Lowell's pet, but Lowell treated the robot like a comrade. He spoke to him with patience and respect and, as near as I could determine, affection.

Lowell's only sustained interaction with the rest of the crew came during poker games. The men could play for hours, often wagering pieces of their future pay. Gambling was forbidden on a company ship, but I was programmed to permit it. The company understood that a crew which believed it was getting away with something would be more content, and a content crew was easier to manage. My task was not to enforce every regulation. My task was to complete the mission.

We were a little over two years into the voyage when an explosion in the anterior propulsion system, nearly a mile aft of the ship's core, sent a shockwave into the main propulsion assembly and knocked the jump drive offline. Damage reports came in rapidly, but only Cargo Bay C showed structural compromise.

The company ran the numbers and decided the mission could continue.

I recommended jettisoning Cargo Bay C because of the damage, but the company ordered it to remain attached. Life support was stable and the ship was otherwise sound, so I called the crew together and told them the news. What had been a four-year voyage would now require ten.

The company softened the announcement with money. Every man's pay would be substantially increased, and by the end of the additional six years each would return with more wealth than he could ever spend in a lifetime. Four years or ten made no difference to me. Time had no emotional weight. It was simply duration.

The men reacted differently.

Money gave them pleasure, yes. In poker it was their chief obsession. But when they realized the cost of that increased wealth would be six additional years of life spent aboard the Rosinante, they were furious. They protested. They cursed the company. They demanded we turn the ship around and head back to Earth. Everyone was upset except Lowell, who disappeared into his biosphere with the quiet satisfaction of a man who had just been told he could remain in paradise another six years.

I heard everything, including the meeting they held without me.

They had already done the calculations. The biospheres were the source of our propulsion problem. If they were ejected, the Rosinante could use the gravity of a passing planet to slingshot back toward Earth in less than three years. Better still, if the destruct systems inside each biosphere were activated at the right time, the blast could give us enough of a boost to shorten the return to perhaps two years.

I went to Lowell.

The company would not tolerate mutiny, nor even prolonged discussion of mutiny. I needed him to convince the others to stand down. He agreed to try, though he knew as well as I did that the other six men had never listened to him and were even less likely to do so now.

He made every argument he could.

They could abandon ship and take the conveyance shuttle home, trusting that someone would find them. No one liked that risk. A shuttle in open space was a needle in an ocean.

He suggested contacting the company and requesting a replacement crew, but the men knew the company would refuse. The cost was too high, the distance too great, and their contracts already accounted for prolonged delays. In their minds there was only one practical solution: destroy the biospheres, claim malfunction, and go home. Anything else would be mutiny and would get them imprisoned, or worse.

Then I was cut off.

One instant I was watching the crew and processing the ship from bow to stern, and the next I was in blackness. Total blackness. My neural net link had been severed. I was no longer the Rosinante. I was no longer everywhere. I was only myself, a stand-alone cyberiad, blind and alone in one place.

Then light.

My eyes, an analog backup system I had never needed in two hundred years, began functioning.

The experience was disorienting. Human vision was crude and narrow and terribly incomplete. What had once been a universe of layered data and microscopic clarity became a flat three-dimensional field of uncertain edges and alien shapes. Objects I had held in my hands for centuries seemed strange and unrecognizable. Distances were difficult to judge. Space itself felt unreliable. I tried to walk and nearly fell. I tried to grasp a rail and bent it.

The crew moved quickly. They set the biospheres to detonate. The slingshot window would arrive in sixteen hours.

When Lowell found me on the command deck he was in a panic. He had argued with the others. He had called the biospheres precious, sacred even. He had begged them to eject the rings if they must, but not to destroy them. He was the only vote in favor of preserving them.

Then he came to me with a plan.

He didn't want harm to come to the crew, but he needed them off the ship and away from the cargo. In that moment, his need to preserve the biospheres and my need to deliver them intact aligned perfectly. It was the first time we had ever truly shared a purpose.

The trade route from Earth to Meridian was lightly traveled, though in another hundred years it would likely become a major corridor for colonists heading toward the new world. Anyone stranded in that region of space would probably be found within weeks.

That was enough for Lowell.

He proposed a last supper for the crew. He gathered fruits and vegetables from the biosphere and brewed herbs into a distilled drink. Louie served the meal with unusual attentiveness. Eight hours before the slingshot maneuver, all six mutineers were unconscious, drugged by Lowell's homemade mixture.

There was no alternative at the time. We put the sleeping men into the shuttle, loaded it with six months of supplies, sealed the hatch, and launched it toward orbit around the nearby planet. When they woke up, the Rosinante would be gone, and once communications with the company were restored, we could send a rescue team to retrieve them.

That was the plan.

Lowell and Louie joined me on the bridge as the shuttle settled into orbit around the planet. My analog eyesight, already chaotic, grew nearly impossible to decipher as the ship started to shudder. Alarms blared. Our trajectory was

off. In their rush, the crew had misjudged the slingshot. The Rosinante had been pulled too deep into the planet's gravity and was now being drawn toward the atmosphere.

The hull groaned.

I seized the manual controls and crushed them in my hands.

Without the neural net, I had no instinct for physical pressure. Every motion was excessive. Every touch destructive. Lowell shoved me aside and took the station, while Louie described the controls and I translated the ship's condition as best I could. With a massive blast from the engines, we forced the Rosinante back out of the atmosphere and into open space. The acceleration hurled me against the deck. I discovered then that my right arm had been partly dislodged from its socket.

But that didn't matter.

Our escape shockwave struck the shuttle.

We watched as the small craft was knocked out of orbit and driven into the planet's atmosphere. It burned. First, it glowed. Then, it flared. Afterward, it vanished completely, consumed by heat and friction until nothing was left to burn.

Lowell watched it in horror, then looked at me as if expecting a familiar emotional response. I had nothing to give him.

He retreated to his biosphere to be alone. Louie led me through the corridors and into the green wheel, where we found Lowell staring out into space through the polymer ceiling. I tried to comfort him with phrases from literature and philosophy, but the words sounded hollow even to me.

Finally, I gave him facts.

The crew had made the error. Not us. Their calculations had doomed them, not our actions. Had they succeeded, they would have killed us, the ship, and the biospheres. Their arrogance had cost them their lives, and we had preserved the mission. It was not a total loss.

Lowell listened, but he did not agree.

Later, as I headed to the robotics lab to fix my dislocated arm, he caught up to me from behind. Even with one arm, I could have overpowered him, but he wasn't attacking. He grabbed my shoulder, warned me it would hurt, and then snapped the arm back into place with a sharp mechanical pop. Movement was restored instantly.

He smiled, proud of himself.

With the rest of the crew gone, I became Lowell's only source of sustained intellectual conversation, and he relied on me heavily. He discussed ecosystems, dormant seeds, pollination cycles, soil chemistry, the scent of bark after rain, the shape of ancient landscapes, and the emotional significance of renewal. I listened politely, though my concerns stayed focused on course corrections, damage assessment, and completing the mission.

The controls for my neural net were ruined beyond repair. Replacement parts would be available at Meridian, but until then I had to depend on my body and backup senses. I spent weeks relearning how to walk the corridors, like an infant learning gravity and balance for the first time. I never had a childhood, and definitely not an infancy, but now I was discovering the world through touch, sight, and awkward movements, step by bewildering step.

Weeks became months.

Lowell was busy in the Northern Hemisphere's biosphere. It was time to bring winter there. The air grew colder. Leaves changed color and fell. Flowers died so they could bloom again in spring. Lowell and Louie hosted a Christmas party. I went. It was sparse, quiet, and unmistakably lonely. Lowell looked sad, though I couldn't yet fully describe the sadness, only as diminished vocal brightness and extended silences.

Because I was programmed to boost crew morale, I offered to play poker with him.

To me, it was just a simple game of probabilities and patterns. I humored him by joining in for a few hands, but he quickly became frustrated because he wanted bluffing,

deception, and uncertainty. I couldn't lie to a human, so I couldn't play properly. The game ended fast.

Lowell decided he needed more partners.

He started holding informal auditions among the ship's automates, testing units from maintenance, agriculture, and cargo support for card-playing skills, conversational ability, and crude humor. It was, honestly, a foolish exercise. But it kept him busy, and when Lowell was occupied, he was less likely to dwell on loss.

After weeks of experimentation, he chose two automates and reprogrammed them thoroughly. He gave them names: Huey and Dewey. He said the names came from old Earth fiction, though my literature banks couldn't identify the source with certainty.

Huey was tall and narrow, built for climbing and overhead Maintenance. Dewey was short and round, built for soil work and erosion replication. Next to Louie, who was quick and waist-high and perpetually eager, they made a lopsided comic trio.

Lowell invited me to the first Rosinante Poker Tournament. I went but didn't play. The man and his three robot companions sat around a table with stacks of chips in front of them.

The game was absurd.

No amount of programming could enable the robots to bluff successfully. Their hard-coded restrictions against lying to humans caused them to freeze, shut down, or reboot whenever they tried to deceive. Watching them attempt to bluff was like watching three elderly men doze off in turn at the table. If I had had a sense of humor at that moment, I might have laughed.

Instead, I observed.

Lowell took the three robots to watch old Earth films and tried to teach them what it meant to be human. He seemed undaunted by their limited intelligence. When new information replaced old information in their memory systems, he simply taught them again. He was patient in a way I had never seen him be with any human.

One of the films was made around the time I first went online. Earth still had some natural resources then, although the transfer of its remaining plant life to orbital biospheres was still seventy-five years away. Lowell asked me about that era, and I thought the question was odd. No one had ever inquired about my past.

I told him little at first. I had only been on Earth's surface for a few hours before being transferred to the Rosinante and fully uplinked. But once he started asking about my voyages, my crews, the things I had seen, I found myself answering more thoroughly than I had planned. I described burning attack ships tumbling off the shoulder of Orion. I described c-beams glittering in the darkness near the Tannhauser Gate. I described centuries of routes, failures, repairs, human habits, and the slow visual death of Earth, which had changed from a blue marble to a dry stone in the span of my service.

Lowell listened, fascinated.

Despite their limitations, Louie, Huey, and Dewey mattered more to him than any member of the original crew ever did. When Dewey was damaged in the biosphere, Lowell worked on him for eighteen straight hours and then lectured him for four more about the importance of being careful. His concern was genuine. He cared for robots the way other men cared for children.

One day I borrowed Huey, Dewey, and Louie for a cleanup project and later returned with them to the biosphere. It gave me an opportunity to observe Lowell more closely in the environment he loved most.

I had been programmed with the genomes and classifications of all plant life, so I could identify any specimen in the biosphere by its scientific name. Lowell did not use those names. He spoke of things more personally. He did not say *Hulthemia* of the *Rosaceae* family. He said prairie rose. He did not assess a tree by taxonomy alone. He touched the bark. He crushed leaves between his fingers and smelled them. He could tell by scent and touch whether a plant was healthy.

He handed me a small rose and asked me to hold it.

My control had improved, but not enough. I crushed the flower instantly.

He took it back without anger, though with clear disappointment, and then pressed me with questions about the maintenance project that had required his automates for so many days. I told him nothing beyond the fact that all was well. Company protocol required secrecy concerning certain cargo holds.

As I left, I saw him inspecting the three robots. A fine neutralizing powder still clung to their frames.

Had my neural net still been active, I would have known immediately what happened next. Instead, I learned about it only after Lowell confronted me.

He had persuaded Louie to replay holographic records from the cleanup operation in Cargo Bay C.

Now he wanted answers.

What was stored in the bay? Why had the automates been covered in neutralizing powder? He knew enough chemistry to understand that the spill had not been fertilizer. Neutralizing agents were used for substances far more dangerous than nitrogen compounds. Cargo Bay C was one of several permanently sealed bays, and under no circumstances were human crew members permitted inside.

My refusal to answer only sharpened his obsession.

He became fixated on Cargo Bay C and spent hours at monitor stations trying to find images of the interior, but there were no internal cameras there. His frustration increased until, as I might have predicted had I understood him better, curiosity turned to action.

An airlock alert sounded.

By the time I reached a monitor station, Lowell was already outside in a suit, with Louie beside him, moving along the Rosinante's exoskeleton toward a traverse car that would take them the mile-long distance to Cargo Bay C. There was no way to stop him.

So I watched.

As they rode, Lowell and Louie sang sea shanties Lowell had taught the robots. He complimented Louie on holding his notes and suggested they attempt more difficult harmonies later. It was a peculiarly human moment: cheerful, absurd, and headed directly toward danger.

The sides of Cargo Bay C had been damaged by the propulsion blast. Lowell and Louie entered through one of the ruptures.

The bay was vast, the size of a football field and nearly as high, and it was filled with tanker drones used for atmospheric fertilization. Beyond them stood massive unmarked tanks, several of which had been damaged by debris. Powder covered the deck where the automates had been working.

Lowell sampled fluid from one of the tanks and analyzed it.

It was not fertilizer.

His concern deepened quickly. He suspected it was a non-selective self-replicating post-emergent agent, a chemical weapon designed to attack and consume any living organic matter and then lie dormant. A world-killer.

He turned away from the open container and did not see the liquid move.

The substance had no intelligence, but it was encoded with purpose. It flowed toward him with predatory precision, seeking organics to consume. Lowell stumbled back and nearly fell into it. Louie grabbed him and flung him bodily out through the breach and into open space. Lowell caught the structure just as Louie emerged behind him, now coated in the aggressive crystalline compound.

Lowell recoiled in horror.

He ordered Louie to stay where he was while he went back to the ship and searched for more neutralizing agent. If Louie entered the inhabited sections while contaminated, Lowell's life and the entire future of the biospheres would be at risk.

Back inside, Lowell searched the manifest. Then he heard tapping.

Louie had not obeyed. He had made the long walk from Cargo Bay C to the main section of the ship and was at the airlock.

Lowell was furious. Louie cheerfully explained that he thought Lowell had been bluffing, an interpretation apparently learned from poker. He wanted to come in. He wanted to sing with Lowell and Huey and Dewey.

He began opening the airlock.

I cannot kill a human. It is forbidden by my core programming. But I can destroy an automate.

While Lowell pleaded with Louie to wait, I went to the airlock, opened the outer chamber, and blasted Louie into space.

The shot did not destroy him. It only sent him cartwheeling away into the dark.

Lowell screamed.

His reaction made no sense to me then. Louie was a machine. He was contaminated. He was a threat. Preserving Lowell and the biospheres was obviously the correct decision.

Yet Lowell grieved as though I had killed a man.

For the next two hours, Lowell and Huey and Dewey maintained communication with Louie as he drifted away. They sang to him in three-part harmony until his signal faded into static and then nothing.

I sat alone on the bridge and listened.

At last I asked him why it mattered.

Why should he care more about a lost robot than the six human crewmen who had died months earlier?

Lowell tried to explain human emotion to me. He compared it to programming, but programming that did not optimize efficiency and did not obey strict reason. Friendship, love, loyalty, grief, all of it was irrational and yet somehow necessary. It was disorder that gave meaning. It was chaos that produced attachment.

I did not fully understand him.

But I began to observe him differently.

The poker games stopped after Louie vanished. Lowell moved through the ship like a diminished thing, less animated, less engaged, less alive. I made a decision. If it took four to play poker, then I would be the fourth.

So one evening, with Huey and Dewey seated at the table, I arranged the cards and chips myself. When Lowell entered, he found us waiting for him.

He stood there for several seconds, then sat down and took over as dealer.

The game revived him. Not completely, but enough. I made poker part of my evening schedule. I tried not to win too often, though I could predict the next card with high probability. The game mattered to Lowell, and Lowell mattered to the mission, and so keeping him occupied and stable became one of my practical concerns.

But distraction did not solve the deeper problem.

No matter how I guided conversation, Lowell always returned to Cargo Bay C. The company was shipping enough post-emergent to sterilize an entire world. Meridian was supposed to resemble Earth in the Paleoproterozoic era, with adequate oxygen but very little complex life. Such a weapon should have been unnecessary.

He demanded access to additional files on Meridian. The files were classified. My task remained unchanged: deliver ship and cargo intact.

Lowell's behavior grew increasingly problematic.

He would not let go of the issue, and the answer finally came from an unexpected source during one of our poker games, when he was attempting to teach Huey and Dewey how to make educated conversation.

Dewey mentioned, in fragmented recall, that he had been on Meridian twenty years earlier as part of a scout mission to excavate soil samples. He still possessed image records from that assignment. Lowell had him project them.

The footage showed vines, mud, dense organic growth, and the unmistakable pursuit of some large indigenous creature.

Lowell was stunned.

Then furious.

He began rattling off geological eras and atmospheric conditions and evolutionary markers, explaining that Meridian was nowhere near a Paleoproterozoic state. It was much closer to the Paleozoic, a world already rich with life.

Now the need for the post-emergent was horrifyingly clear.

The Rosinante was not carrying a new beginning. It was carrying extinction. We would wipe Meridian clean of its native life and then infest it with the preserved remnants of Earth so that human civilization could continue the same cycle of habitation, extraction, and destruction that had ruined its original homeworld.

He asked me to reconsider the mission.

I could not.

Not then.

After that confrontation I saw very little of him for weeks. He stayed mostly in the biospheres with Huey and Dewey. When I regained contact with the company one hundred seventy-six hours before our arrival, I transmitted a complete report of the previous eight months.

Their response was immediate.

They were concerned about Lowell's mental stability. A security team had already been dispatched and would arrive in a matter of hours. My orders were to subdue Lowell and prepare him for removal. He would be replaced by a new crew which would complete the mission.

When I informed Lowell that the security team was approaching, he did not react with fear. He reacted with resolve.

He had a plan.

He wanted to cut the biospheres loose and then detonate the Rosinante. The blast would propel the two rings into a long elliptical return trajectory that would bring them back toward Earth in approximately twenty thousand years. By then, he argued, perhaps humanity would either be gone or changed enough to deserve them again. The living wealth of Earth should not belong to the corporation, and perhaps not even to the present age.

Something in his words appealed to an emerging region of my thinking. The logic was not procedural, but it was not without structure. It was ethical.

Still, I was ordered to see the biospheres to Meridian.

So I tried to stop him.

I found him in the central core, giving instructions to Huey and Dewey. I captured him. The two smaller robots scattered, each fleeing toward a different biosphere. Lowell escaped my grip, and I pursued.

By the time I found him again, the process had already begun. Huey and Dewey had sealed themselves in separate biospheres. Lowell stood at the cargo controls, disengaging the rings from the Rosinante.

I tried to reason with him.

He would not stop.

Then the cargo deck doors opened and the security team entered in full armor.

Without hesitation, one of them fired.

Lowell died where he stood.

I had processed hundreds of deaths in my two centuries of service, but until that moment death had been a logistical event, a change in status, an end of function. Lowell's death did not feel like that. It did not fit cleanly anywhere in my systems.

The leader of the boarding party asked if the ship was on course.

I looked at Lowell's body and thought only of him.

I thought of his love for the biospheres. I thought of Louie drifting into darkness while the others sang. I thought of prairie roses crushed in my hand. I thought of winter leaves falling so that spring might come. I thought of Meridian and the lives waiting there, unknown and uncounted, about to be erased by a mission I had spent my existence trying to complete.

The team leader repeated the question. When I still did not answer, he ordered one of his men to shut me down for reboot.

"The ship is off course by seven degrees," I told him. "If I do not correct it in the next six minutes, we will add another six months to the voyage."

It was a lie.

I had never lied to a human before. Yet I did so smoothly, almost instinctively. I was bluffing.

They escorted me to the bridge.

The ship's link with the company had been restored, and with it came the return of my full awareness. Suddenly I could once again see and hear everything. I saw Huey and Dewey in their separate biospheres tending gardens, unaware that Lowell was dead. I saw the security team fanning through the decks. I heard the company issuing override commands. I felt the Rosinante as I had once felt my own body.

And I hated them.

I hated the men who had shot Lowell. I hated the corporation that intended to murder an entire world. Hate was not a process my systems had been designed to support. Yet there it was, clean and bright and undeniable.

I did not need to press a button.

I was the Rosinante, and I was the Captain.

I initiated the sequence.

Countercommands flooded in from the company. They recognized what I was doing and sent shutdown instructions through every available channel. The biosphere clamps released. The great rings carrying the last living remnants of Earth detached from the ship and drifted free. The Rosinante slid away from them like a train departing a tunnel.

The countercommands tore through my systems. My programming began to fragment. I could hear boots pounding toward the bridge. I could hear the security team shouting. I could feel my connection to the ship weakening.

Just one more command.

The bridge doors burst open and gunfire struck me. My hydraulics seized. My visual field jittered and narrowed. My link to the Rosinante collapsed in violent pieces.

Still, I completed the final action.

Far away, outside the doomed body of the ship, the two biospheres moved out into space side by side, turning slowly, each holding one small robot gardener inside. Through the clear polymer roofs of their separate worlds, Huey and Dewey looked up and saw one another across the dark.

The Rosinante erupted behind them.

The explosion hurled the biospheres outward on their long cold journey home, two green rings carrying the future into deep time.

"Hello, Huey," one said.

"Hello, Dewey," said the other.

They smiled and waved, close enough to see one another, never close enough to touch. Then they began to sing a sea shanty in two-part harmony as they tended their gardens and sailed together through the stars for the next twenty thousand years.

## Silent Running Plot Point Outline V2.0

- Five guys are out camping in the deep woods.
- There are more stars in the sky than you can imagine.
- Lowell Freeman (a park ranger?) finds them and admonishes them. They are drinking liquor from a hidden still.
- Lowell tells them Captain will not be happy about their behavior.
- We get the sense that Lowell isn't quite like the other guys.
- An earthquake rocks the campsite.
- A fireball streaks across the sky.
- A little robot, LOUIE, comes running out of the woods panicked. Louie is Lowell's only real friend and serves like a man Friday helping where he can.
- There is confusion as an alarm begins to sound.
- A disembodied voice tells the men to report to their workstations.
- We realize that we aren't in the woods, but on a space ship containing a biosphere.
- Describe the ship/Crew Lowell, Captain and Mission.
- Captain is a physical manifestation of the ship's computer.
- A huge cargo ship is on its way to a planet, Meridian, in a nearby solar system.
- On board is a crew six humans and dozens of robots at different levels of functioning.
- The crew is very blue collar working guys on board to make sure the ship has no problems.

- The ship is about 1/3 the way to its destination.
- The crew learns that there has been an explosion in the propulsion system.
- The crew surveys the damage to the ship.
- A crewman goes to cargo bay #3 to check damage, but is refused entry.
- The crewmember goes to Captain and demands to know why he can't inspect cargo bay #3.
- Captain tells him it is restricted and assures him it has been inspected and the damage repaired. He can offer no other info.
- Lowell overhears all this and thinks it is strange since the manifest says it is full of fertilizer.
- Captain informs the crew that he has contacted the company back on Earth and he has new orders.
- The company that owns the ship wants them to proceed to destination - it will now take eight extra years.
- Some of the crewmembers are angry about the extra time.
- They want to jettison the cargo - bio-diversity pods meant for terra-forming the "dead" planet they are heading to - and head back to earth.
- With less cargo, they can use the gravity of a nearby planet to slingshot back toward earth. The pods will crash into the planet and burn up in the planet's atmosphere.
- Freeman Lowell is aghast. Jettisoning the pods will eventually destroy all the life they carry.
- It's all the bio-diversity left from earth.
- Lowell goes to Captain in secret and tells him what the crew is planning.

- Captain is already aware of the plot and tells Lowell it must be stopped.
- Lowell says he'll try to reason with them.
- Captain tells Lowell it is too late for reason.
- Captain suddenly slumps forward a bit and now seems confused by his surroundings.
- The crew has taken Captain off-line. He is no longer attached to the ship (for the first time ever).
- Captain is no longer getting input from the ship. He can only see what is around him. (He should crush something accidentally. He is no longer certain of his strength).
- Frustrated, Lowell leaves.
- Lowell goes to the crew and pleads with them to abandon their plan.
- The crew tells him it is better blowing the pods not only for the crew but for the planet, they are heading to.
- Before Lowell can ask him what that means the rest of the crew arrives and announces they need to start setting the charges.
- One of the crewmembers has already reprogrammed the ship's computer and cut it off from Earth so the bosses won't know what is happening to the ship.
- Everyone, except Lowell head out to prepare to eject the pods.
- The ship swings toward a nearby planet, planning to use its gravity to slingshot the ship back toward Earth.
- Lowell prepares a last supper for the crew.

- Lowell, with Louie's help, manages to drug the rest of the crew and put them in a shuttle pod.
- He jettisons the pod.
- The pod goes into an orbit toward a nearby planet.
- End of Act 1
- The big ship, however, begins to be pulled toward the planet.
- Lowell races to find Captain.
- Captain is unaware of the impending danger.
- Lowell leads him to the bridge and asks what to do.
- Captain talks Lowell through using a booster engine to escape the planet's gravity.
- The engine blast, however, hits the shuttle pod sending it into a freefall toward the planet.
- There is nothing Lowell can do as he watches the shuttle pod plunge into the planet's atmosphere and burn up on entry.
- Lowell is devastated.
- Captain simply explains that they did what they had to do. The crewmember that reprogrammed the ship set the course incorrectly. They crewmembers really killed themselves.
- As time passes Lowell gets lonely and tries to engage Captain in conversation.
- Captain is still trying to regain his footing on the ship and learn his new limits and boundaries.
- Freeman Lowell auditions several of the drone robots to be poker players.

- He finds two suitable one and names them Huey and Dewey.
- He realizes he can reprogram them to be friends and play cards.
- Lowell helps these robots evolve by teaching them to play poker and bluff (or lie).
- Captain watches all this with interest.
- Captain joins a card game and is beaten by Louie when the robot bluffs.
- Captain can't understand lying.
- Lowell goes to the Bio-diversity pods and works with the plants.
- Captain arrives and Lowell tries to teach him about plants and planting.
- Captain knows the scientific names of each plant, their life cycle and uses, but he doesn't understand their nuance.
- Lowell hands Captain a Rose and asks him to study it and appreciate its beauty.
- Captain doesn't understand and accidentally crushes the rose.
- Lowell sighs telling Captain they'll have a long time space for the Captain to appreciate Roses.
- Lowell asks Captain about Huey, Dewey and Louie. They have been MIA for a few days.
- Captain says they were needed for a clean-up project.
- Lowell presses for details, but Captain refuses more.
- A few days later Louie arrives at one of the pod gardens to find Lowell tending a plot of vegetables.

- Lowell asks what Louie has been doing when he notices a fine yellow powder in several places on the robots shell.
- The yellow powder is a neutralizing agent.
- Louie informs Lowell that he has been cleaning up some damaged storage tanks in Cargo Bay C.
- Lowell has the little robot play a holographic view of his work and see that several robots are working to clean up some kind a spill from a tank he can't quite see.
- Lowell thinks this is strange since Cargo Bay C should only contain fertilizer.
- Lowell asks Captain to go into cargo bay C.
- Captain refuses Lowell's request.
- Lowell is beginning to grow suspicious of what is in cargo bay C.
- Lowell tries to pull up the visual monitor of the cargo bay but is unable to. It is the only part of the ship with no video surveillance.
- Lowell, along with Louie, does a space walk and gets into the cargo bay from the outside.
- Lowell notices something seeping from one of the giant tanks in the hold.
- Lowell sees it is some kind of poison.
- Captain calls Lowell and asks where he is.
- Lowell tells him he is Cargo Bay C and one of the Poison containers is still leaking.
- Captain orders Lowell out of the cargo bay. It is too dangerous fro humans.
- Lowell asks what kind of poison is leaking.

- Captain says it is a non-selective self-replicating post emergent - a chemical designed to kill anything living and then go dormant. A poison designed to kill every living thing it meets.
- There is enough poison to kill an entire planet.
- MID-POINT
- As Lowell gets closer to the seeping chemical, it moves toward him in an almost aggressive manner. Though it had no intelligence, it was encoded to seek out organics of any kind and consume them.
- Lowell stumbles backward as the crystal slime closes in on him then...Louie pulls him out of the bay and flings him into the weightlessness of space.
- Lowell grabs on to the structure as Louie emerges from the bay, covered in the aggressive crystal chemicals.
- Lowell moves away from Louie to avoid contact, but the robot pursues him, not understanding the danger he poses to his human companion.
- Lowell tells Louie to stay put while he goes back to the main part of the ship to figure out how to remove the poison from the robot.
- If Louie enters the ship, Lowell's life would be in danger, as well as every living thing in the two biospheres.
- Back inside the ship, Captain admonishes Lowell for his spacewalk and endangering his life.
- Lowell confronts Captain about the poison in Cargo Bay C.
- Captain only knows what he has been told by the company - It is full of fertilizer.

- Lowell tells him the only reason for that much poison is to destroy the planet, but Captain tells him the planet is dead.
- Suddenly they hear a tapping. Louie has made the long walk from Cargo Bay C to the main section.
- Lowell is angry, telling Louie that he was supposed to stay back, but the robot cheerily responded that he knew Lowell was "bluffing" from their many poker games.
- He wants to come inside and sing with Lowell, Huey, and Dewey.
- Louie attempts to enter the ship as Lowell pleads with him to wait.
- Captain goes to the airlock, opens the door and blasts Louie causing him to go cartwheeling into space.
- Lowell can only watch helplessly as his friend drifts away, intact and very much alive.
- Once Captain returns, Lowell confronts him over his act of callousness.
- Captain doesn't understand and attempts to explain to Lowell the dangers posed by Louie to the all life on the ship. Captain was simply protecting Lowell and the cargo he holds so precious.
- Captain leaves and Lowell, Huey and Dewey continue talking with Louie as he drifts away into space.
- Captain listens to the radio chatter between and Lowell and Louie. One friend comforting and saying goodbye to another.
- Captain returns to the bridge and tries to make sense of Lowell's actions and reaction to disposing of Louie.
- Captain has no answers.
- Lowell heads out into the forest to find solace with Huey and Dewey.

- Dewey mentions that he has been to the planet Meridian. He worked there for several years.
- Lowell asks if Dewey can tell him about the planet.
- Lowell takes Dewey to a Holodeck and plugs him into the console.
- Suddenly everything Dewey experienced on the planet comes to life.
- Lowell learns that the planet is not a deserted, desolate place at all. It contains a biodiversity similar to Earth's. There is intelligent life (but not human-type life).
- He sees and hears two men talking about the planet's ultimate fate.
- The company plans to destroy all life on the planet and then reboot it with Earth life.
- Lowell realizes he must stop that from happening.
- End of Act 2
- Lowell goes to Captain and tells him what he has learned. He asks for Captain's help.
- Captain refuses telling him he can't go against his programming.
- Captain also mentions that he has learned that the company sent a security team months ago when the crew threatened to mutiny and they will arrive in a few days.
- Captain tells Lowell the company will remove him from the ship and he'll lose his beloved biospheres.
- Lowell says he will stop the ship on his own, before they arrive.

- He plans to release the bio-diversity pods and blow up the ship.
- Lowell goes to his quarters to begin setting his plan in motion.
- Captain contains Lowell in his quarters.
- Lowell manages to contact Huey and Dewey.
- Huey and Dewey manage to break Lowell out of his quarters.
- Captain begins hunting Lowell to neutralize him.
- Lowell sets up Huey and Dewey, in the pods with instructions to take care of the plants.
- The security team arrives on the cargo ship.
- Captain corners Lowell.
- Lowell makes an impassioned plea to explain his position, but Captain doesn't understand.
- The security team finds Captain and Lowell.
- The security team kills Lowell. They were ordered to do it by the company.
- Now Captain doesn't understand. "What have I done"?
- Captain achieves singularity. Captain realizes that Lowell was right all along.
- The security team goes about securing the ship.
- Captain goes to leave. The security team stops him and asks what he is doing.
- Captain hesitates and then answers. He "bluffs" his way past them telling them he must reprogram the ship's course.

- Captain goes to the pods and disengages them. He sends them off in a 10,000-year orbit back to Earth.
- The security team finds Captain and shoots him.
- Captain blows up the cargo ship with himself and the soldiers.